

Strengthening Women's Role in Indian Politics for Societal Empowerment

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how women's political engagement has changed India, following its history from the suffrage movement before independence to more recent legislative changes like the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam. Although gender equality is guaranteed by the Indian Constitution, women are still underrepresented in political institutions; India is ranked 174th out of 181 countries in the world. Utilizing secondary data from government documents, policy reports, and peer-reviewed publications, the study examines the economic, cultural, and structural obstacles that prevent women from achieving political empowerment. In light of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which have effectively raised the proportion of women in Panchayati Raj institutions, it emphasizes the significance of grassroots involvement. The report highlights the importance of Self-Help Groups (SHGs), capacity-building initiatives such as "She is a Changemaker," and case studies of successful female leaders as models for enhancing women's leadership. But issues like media bias, economic reliance, political tokenism, and patriarchal norms still prevent meaningful political participation. Systemic improvements are still necessary to guarantee meaningful representation, even in the face of rising female voter turnout and some significant legislative initiatives. The article ends with practical policy proposals, such as enforcing reservation laws, bolstering institutional support, providing more resources and training for female candidates, and influencing public opinion through dialogue. India can progress toward a more inclusive and equitable democracy by acknowledging women as leaders and changemakers in addition to being voters.

Keywords: Political Participation, Gender Equality, Panchayati Raj, Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, Self-Help Groups, Empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

Empowering women through political participation in India is a complex and ever-changing phenomenon with strong origins in the social, constitutional, and historical fabric of the country. Encouraging women to become knowledgeable voters and influential leaders is central to the idea of empowerment, especially in politics. Creating a space where women can assert their rights, shape policies, and make significant contributions to development and governance is more important than just increasing the number of women (M. Das, 2022). It was during the freedom movement that women in India first began to take an active role in politics. Inspiring a sense of political agency and collective purpose, leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi urged women to break away from traditional roles and join the fight for independence. Nevertheless, after independence, this initial enthusiasm did not materialize into significant representation in political institutions. Women held fewer than five percent of Lok Sabha seats in the initial general elections following independence, despite playing a pivotal role in the fight for independence (J. Das et al., 2022). This persistent underrepresentation prompted discussions and policy actions to elevate women's political standing. The Indian Constitution ensures equal rights and opportunities for all citizens, regardless of their gender, laying a solid groundwork for gender equality. The gender gap in politics has been addressed through a number of policy and legislative initiatives over the years. Notably, women's participation at the grassroots level increased substantially after the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments mandated reservations for them in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and urban local bodies (Parveen & Hussain, 2024). As a result of these changes, millions of women are now in positions of power at the municipal level, where they can shape the priorities for development and the distribution of resources. There has been progress, but there is still a lack of female representation in political office. Midway through the 2010s, women's turnout in national elections was 65.63 percent, nearly equal to men's 67.09% in the 2014 parliamentary elections. This showed that women were becoming more politically active as voters (M. Das, 2022). Having said that, the percentage of women in national and state legislatures in India is significantly lower than the global average, and the country ranks 20th from the bottom when it comes to women's representation in parliament. A handful of women from India have held the highest offices, including prime minister and president, but they are the exception rather than the rule. Institutional reforms or quotas are not the only factors that determine political empowerment. Lots of personal, cultural, and socioeconomic factors come into play with it (Prodip, 2022).

Objectives of the Study

- To evaluate the constitutional and legislative frameworks that promote women's political participation in India.
- To analyze the current status and barriers to women's representation in political institutions at various levels.
- To assess the impact of women's political participation on governance, social development, and gender equality.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study examines Indian women's political participation mostly using secondary data sources. In addition to credible media stories, peer-reviewed research papers, and other government websites and reports, data has been methodically gathered from official reports released by the Election Commission of India. Regarding election trends, candidate representation, and policy developments, these sources offer thorough and reliable information.

Historical Context

The intricate web of social reform, political action, and legislative landmarks in India's colonial and post-colonial periods provides the historical backdrop for women's empowerment through political participation.

Pre-Independence Era: Seeds of Political Participation

Indian society under British colonial rule was patriarchal, and women were underrepresented in politics. The Indian women's suffrage movement began in the early 1900s, influenced by international campaigns and the Indian independence struggle. Sarojini Naidu and Annie Besant led a 1917 petition to the Secretary of Indian Affairs to include Indian women's rights in the definition of "Indian People."

The Southborough Franchise Committee (1918–19) reflected conservative views by determining that social conditions did not yet enable women's electoral participation (Moorthy, 2020). Persistence by Indian women's groups and leaders yielded some success. The first province to grant women limited suffrage was Madras in 1921. Most women could not exercise this right due to property and education restrictions. In the 1930s, a few women could vote and run for office after other provinces passed modest reforms, but they had little influence in provincial legislatures. Education was crucial then. Higher education empowered women to lead, organize, and advocate for suffrage and other social reforms. Educational institutions provided networking and leadership development, fueling the suffrage movement and gender equality (Kausthubham, 2023).

Women in the Freedom Struggle

Women played an important role in the Indian independence movement, which occurred concurrently with the suffrage movement. In important movements like the Civil Disobedience Movement and the Swadeshi movement, women were instrumental in organising demonstrations, gathering resources, and holding positions of leadership (Devi, 2023).

Famous women who were politically active, such as Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, and Vijayalakshmi Pandit, became role models for younger women. Nevertheless, long-standing gender biases and societal norms continued to limit women's official representation in political institutions, even though they were actively involved in mass movements (Pathania & Ankit, 2023).

Post-Independence: Constitutional Guarantees and Early Challenges

The attainment of independence in 1947 was a watershed event. In 1951–1952, during India's first general elections, the Indian Constituent Assembly—which included fifteen women—adopted universal adult suffrage with little resistance, making the country a pioneer in granting the right to vote to all adults (Moorthy, 2020). This represented the new republic's progressive ideals and was a huge change from the colonial past.

Articles 14, 15, and 16 of the Indian Constitution forbade discrimination on the basis of gender and guaranteed legal equality for all citizens beginning in 1950 (Saxena & Srivastava, 2024). These provisions paved the way for women to have a voice in politics and hold positions of power in society. It took time, though, for constitutional principles to become law. The persistent gap between legal rights and actual representation was highlighted in the first Lok Sabha (1952), when only 22 women were elected out of 489 members.

The advancement of women in politics in India has been gradual but steady over the years. The disparity between male and female voters has shrunk from 16.7 percent in 1962 to 1.5 percent in 2014, thanks to rising female voter turnout. Despite this, women continue to face a number of institutional and social hurdles that prevent them from fully participating in politics and from holding positions of power (Devi, 2023).

Legislative and Policy Frameworks

The Constitution of India serves as the cornerstone of the country's framework for women's political empowerment, which has developed through time through significant amendments and targeted policies. All of these structures work toward the same goal: to make sure women have equal rights, equal say in government, and equal pay for equal work.

Constitutional Provisions

There is a solid foundation for gender equality in India's Constitution. Article 14 gives everyone the right to be treated fairly by the law, Article 15 forbids discrimination based on gender, and Article 16 guarantees equal opportunity in public employment. Notably, the State is empowered to make special provisions for women, enabling affirmative action to address historical disadvantages, according to Article 15(3). State Policy Directives bolster this dedication even more: Equal rights to livelihood are enshrined in Article 39(a), equal pay for equal work is demanded in Article 39(d), and humane working conditions and maternity relief are necessitated by Article 42 (Team, 2024).

Reservation in Local Governance

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, passed in 1992, were a watershed moment because they required urban local bodies and Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) to set aside a minimum of one-third of their seats for women. In order to guarantee that underrepresented groups are represented, these amendments also set aside one-third of the chairperson positions for women, including those from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. This reservation has been raised to 50% in certain states, including Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Kerala, and Maharashtra. Millions of women are now holding elected positions in local governance structures, thanks to the implementation of these quotas, which has greatly enhanced women's representation at the grassroots level. Public goods and welfare policies, including water supply, roads, and maternal health, have been prioritized as a result, which has increased women's participation (Dutta, 2023).

Legislative Initiatives for Higher Representation

The Women's Reservation Bill (108th Amendment) has sparked decades of discussion in state and federal legislatures. A total of 33 percent of the seats in the Lok Sabha and state legislatures would be set aside for women under the proposed law. Despite the fact that it is still pending and has encountered political obstacles, a major development happened in 2023 when the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhinyam passed both houses of parliament and is now waiting for presidential assent. There will be a watershed moment in the fight for gender parity in legislatures when this bill becomes law.

Current Status of Women's Political Participation

Women's political engagement in India has come a long way in the last few decades, but they are still severely underrepresented in positions of power. The path toward gender parity is far from finished, but the present status is influenced by a mix of social movements, changing electoral dynamics, and legislative reforms.

Parliamentary and Cabinet Representation

The Women in Politics 2025 Report produced by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and UN Women places India at position 174 out of 181 nations in terms of the representation of women in politics as of the year 2025. Compared to the worldwide average of 22.9% for cabinet positions, the proportion of women in the Union Cabinet is 9.7%, which is the second-lowest since 2011 (unwomen, 2025). Parity between the sexes is an objective of international frameworks like the Beijing Platform for Action, but women only make up 14.7% of parliamentarians. This is much lower than the worldwide average of 27%. From 543 seats in the Lok Sabha in 2019 to 74 seats in 2024, the number of women MPs has varied. This decrease, in spite of increased public understanding and support, highlights the pervasive obstacles that women still encounter (Nayak & Vivek, 2025).

Voter Participation

The striking rise in female voter participation is one trend worth noting. Women had a slightly higher turnout than men in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections (65.78% vs. 65.8%), and they were elected to 137 more seats than men (Nayak & Vivek, 2025). From earlier decades, when women's turnout was lower than men's, this is a huge change. To increase women's turnout at the polls, the Election Commission of India (ECI) has been instrumental in enhancing security, expanding voting locations, and communicating with the public. With women comprising nearly half of the electorate, political parties are beginning to court them with welfare programs and direct cash transfers in an effort to harness their collective voting power (Nextias, 2025).

Local Governance and Grassroots Leadership

Legislative quotas have had a revolutionary effect on the ground level. A third of the seats in urban local bodies and Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) must be reserved for women, as per the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments; however, in some states, this percentage is raised to 50%. Consequently, by December 2020, women will have achieved a level of grassroots representation in local government bodies in India that no other country has seen before, with over 44% of elected seats held by women. Because of this, millions of women have gained the agency to influence development priorities and resource distribution at the local and regional levels (Rathore, 2023).

Barriers to Women's Political Empowerment

In India, a complicated network of institutional, social, and economic barriers prevents women from achieving political empowerment. These barriers still restrict the amount and caliber of women's political participation, even in the face of affirmative action laws and constitutional guarantees. Sociocultural barriers continue to be one of the most enduring issues. Traditional roles for women are determined by ingrained patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes, which frequently deter women from entering the political sphere or engaging in public life. In many areas, women are expected to put family obligations ahead of civic involvement, and men typically make the majority of decisions in households and communities (Varghese & Sabharwal, 2023). Gendered political socialization, which discourages or discourages women and girls from pursuing careers in politics, serves to further reinforce these cultural norms. Economic obstacles are also important. Independent financial resources are essential for running for office and maintaining political campaigns, but many women lack them. Their independence and capacity to participate in political processes are limited by their financial reliance on male family members. This is especially true for women from underrepresented groups, like Dalit and tribal women, who experience exacerbated disadvantages because of their caste and gender (Pandey & Kumar, 2023). Barriers that are structural and institutional are equally important. As gatekeepers to elected office, political parties frequently field few female candidates and infrequently provide them with the training and resources they need. The purpose of reservation policies is undermined by the prevalence of proxy representation, in which females are elected to meet quota requirements while male relatives hold actual power. Women are further marginalized in political spaces by systemic exclusion, a lack of capacity-building, and restricted access to political networks. Women's political participation is also influenced by societal perceptions and media representation. Negative or stereotyped media coverage can deter women from running for office, and society's mistrust of women's leadership skills keeps them underrepresented (Vishwakarma, 2025).

Impact of Women's Political Participation

In India, women's political engagement has a significant impact on social development, governance, and the larger movement for gender equality. The country's democratic environment is changing as a result of women's growing participation as voters, leaders, and policymakers, even though their representation in elected posts is still below international averages.

Strengthening Democracy and Representation

The inclusion of women in political institutions is essential to a democracy that is really representational. Women who engage in politics provide a range of viewpoints and agendas to the formulation of public policy, resulting in more equitable and inclusive governance. Their participation guarantees that legislative agendas and public policies more accurately represent the demands and interests of half the people. This is acknowledged by the Indian Constitution, which guarantees women equal political rights. The Women's Reservation Act 2023 seeks to close the representation gap even more (The IAS Hub, 2025).

Policy Outcomes and Social Welfare

Women leaders are more inclined to give social welfare, healthcare, education, and child development top priority when making policy decisions, according to empirical data. As a result, topics that have traditionally received less attention in political contexts where men predominate—such as gender-based violence, maternity health, and sanitation—get more attention. It has been demonstrated, for instance, that women-led Panchayats enhance the provision of public goods and services, especially those that advantage women and children. Reservation laws have made it easier for women to participate in local administration, which has yielded noticeable gains in resource distribution and community well-being (Varghese & Sabharwal, 2023).

Empowerment and Social Change

Women gain confidence, social standing, and decision-making skills through political participation. Women who are elected officials or engaged voters become more visible and vocal in public life, defying gender stereotypes and encouraging others to pursue leadership positions. Beyond the individual, this empowerment promotes a culture that encourages women and girls to take on leadership roles and participate in civic life. In addition to tearing down patriarchal barriers and advancing gender equality in other domains, more women entering politics serve as role models (Nextias, 2025).

Economic and Developmental Benefits

Women's political engagement is associated with more general developmental results. Research shows that nations with more women in leadership positions make greater strides toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 5 on gender equality.

Stronger anti-corruption policies, better public services, and more fair resource allocation result from women's participation in decision-making. Women have become a crucial electoral bloc in India, surpassing men in a number of constituencies during the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. As a result, political parties have responded to their concerns by implementing specific welfare policies and programs (Nayak & Vivek, 2025).

Persistent Challenges and the Way Forward

Problems persist despite these beneficial effects. State legislatures have less than 10% female members and just 13% female ministers, thus there needs to be ongoing reform and capacity-building. The transformation of numerical representation into meaningful engagement and leadership requires tackling socio-cultural obstacles, economic limitations, and institutional prejudices (Varghese & Sabharwal, 2023).

Successful Initiatives and Case Studies

The best examples of India's advancement in women's political empowerment are a variety of effective programs and case studies that emphasize both institutional support and grassroots ingenuity.

- Kerala's Kudumbashree pioneered multi-actor women's empowerment. Kudumbashree, operated by the Kerala government, uses SHGs and community networks to fight poverty and empower women. Its partnership with local governments, NGOs, and financial institutions to empower women via capacity building, social inclusion, and entrepreneurship is its strength. Kudumbashree's bottom-up approach empowers women to participate in local governance, shape policy, and generate sustainable social change. Policy support and grassroots mobilization have led to broad-based development in the program, which can be replicated across India (Venugopalan et al., 2021).
- The National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) has fostered Self-Help Groups (SHGs) across the country, and they have been instrumental in promoting political empowerment and changing gender stereotypes. SHGs, which have more than 8.4 crore female members, offer forums for peer support, leadership development, and financial inclusion. Participation in SHGs boosts women's self-esteem, promotes group activity, and makes it easier for them to enter local politics, according to research. The ability of social and economic networks to foster political agency is demonstrated by the higher likelihood of women participating in SHGs attending Gram Sabha meetings, running for office locally, and speaking out for the needs of the community (Neelam et al., 2023).
- Women's leadership development is further supported by capacity-building initiatives. A nationwide program called "She is a Changemaker" by the National Commission for Women aims to improve the communication, leadership, and decision-making abilities of female political leaders at all levels, from gram panchayats to parliament. The program's goal is to assist women assert their legitimate place in governance by enhancing their presence and efficacy in political institutions through mentorship and training tailored to each region (PIB, 2021).
- Individual leader case studies offer verifiable proof of the effectiveness of these programs. For instance, Sampatiya Uikey developed into a Zila Panchayat President and then a Rajya Sabha member after starting her political career as a Sarpanch in a distant tribal community. Her path serves as an example of how women from marginalized origins may achieve the highest levels of political office through grassroots leadership with the help of reservation policies and capacity-building initiatives (Shodh, 2025). In a similar vein, Mamta Devi, a Pradhan from a community that was poor and disenfranchised, used her background in women's organizations and her dedication to community development to create inclusive governance and constructive transformation in her Panchayat (Paul, 2024).

Policy Recommendations

- It is imperative that the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, which allocates one-third of the seats in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies to women, be given top priority and constantly monitored while it is being put into action. Execution after delimitation and making sure that reservation becomes actual participation, not merely symbolic presence, will determine the impact of this historic legislation, which institutionalizes women's representation at the highest levels. The administration should release transparent instructions for putting the law into action and speed up the required delimitation and census processes to avoid delays.
- Leadership development and capacity-building are of utmost importance. To better prepare women for leadership roles, improve their communication skills, and educate them about the law, the government and civil society should increase funding for training programs like "Sashakt Panchayat-Netri Abhiyan" and "She is a Changemaker" run by the National Commission for Women. Aspiring women politicians, particularly those at the grassroots level, can be supported and guided through the political process and public life through mentorship networks and specialized schools.
- political parties ought to be encouraged or compelled to nominate a greater number of female candidates and provide them with necessary tools, education, and funding for their campaigns. To level the playing field, we should set up public funding or subsidized loans specifically for female candidates, and we should advocate for women's corporate lobbies and civil society groups to generate money for campaigns that are led by women.
- It is crucial to strengthen pipelines for local governance. Panchayati Raj Institutions already have a 33% (and 50% in certain states) reservation, which the government should use to foster a bottom-up political culture. Funding initiatives that increase local elected women's access to education, computer literacy, and legal knowledge will pave the way for them to assume more senior leadership positions.
- The normalization and celebration of female leadership requires eliminating gender bias in public discourse and the media. Society attitudes can be changed and gendered reporting reduced through the launch of public awareness initiatives and the introduction of media norms of conduct.

- It is imperative that judicial and legal interventions are fortified to guarantee prompt action in the face of gender-based violence and discrimination. The spirit of the law can be strengthened by expediting these cases and maintaining constitutional guarantees of equality.

CONCLUSION

In India, women's political empowerment is a social and constitutional need for inclusive democracy and fair development. India has achieved remarkable strides over the years, from women's active engagement in the liberation movement to the passage of laws like the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution and the more recent Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam. These initiatives have helped increase women's visibility, particularly at the local level, and have made substantial strides toward greater inclusivity in politics, social justice, and democratic processes. Nevertheless, women still encounter a multitude of obstacles that prevent them from fully engaging in politics. These include societal and cultural standards, economic dependence, institutional bias, and a lack of leadership training opportunities. More women are voting and serving in local government, which is encouraging, but there has to be more structural change to address the ongoing underrepresentation of women in state and federal legislatures. Support from systems, development of skills, and shifts in mindset are necessary for empowerment to take place. It is critical to create gender-sensitive policy frameworks, elevate women's leadership in public conversations, and fortify the political pipeline at all levels, from the grassroots to the federal. While there is still a long way to go before gender parity in politics is achieved, India can make great strides in this direction by committing to empowering its women leaders and fostering a more equitable, inclusive, and vibrant democracy.

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